

# Virginia Gardening

*with Jim May*

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## **A little extra care now will keep your lawn looking good all summer**

After an especially harsh February in the northeast, spring is finally arriving in Virginia. The season of spring showers, spring flowers, mulching and mowing is upon us. If you haven't already gotten your mower tuned up and had the blade sharpened, now's the time.

Keeping up with early spring mowing on a regular basis is critical to having a thick, green, weed-free lawn all year. There are two schools of thought on how high to mow the lawn in the spring. Cool-season grasses such as bluegrass and tall fescues, grown in the northern and western parts of Virginia, should be mowed at taller heights than warm-season turf like Bermuda grass and zoysia grass.

The first school says to mow cool-season turf shorter (1½ -2 inches) the first several times each spring to remove a lot of the winter-burned, brown grass leaves. By exposing more dark green growth, your lawn will green up faster and be more uniform, so this theory says. Then, after several mowings, move the height up to 2 ½ inches.

However, my thoughts on this have always been to start out mowing at 2½ inches to shade out weed seeds (crabgrass) attempting to germinate and expose as much leaf area as possible to the sun to increase photosynthesis, thereby promoting stronger root growth. A good strong root system is needed to help the lawn survive hot, dry summers.

Whenever I see well-intentioned people scalping their lawns in an attempt to slow down growth, I cringe because I know their attempt is futile and that the root system suffers as a result.

Mow when the lawn needs it! Mow often enough so that at any one mowing only 1/3 of the leaf height is removed. During the active-growing season in the spring this may mean every five or six days and every 10 days or less when growth slows down in the summer.

In the summer, I think most people agree to raise the mowing height to protect the grass from summer heat and drought injury. Continue to mow regularly because high grass, especially cool-season grasses like tall fescue, tend to fall over and mat down during hot summer weather, causing the possibility of increased summer disease problems.

A sharp mower blade is more critical to lawn health than most people think. Dull blades don't cut cleanly, but rather shred the ends of the leaf blades. The shredded ends dry out, giving the lawn a whitish look. Under normal use,

mower blades should be sharpened about every 10 hours of use. That means several times a season, not just the once-in-the-spring sharpening to which we are accustomed.

Wet grass and thin lawns with a lot of dirt or sand tend to dull mower blades almost immediately. Repeated mowings with a dull mower blade can increase disease problems in turf by leaving the ends of the grass leaves ragged and open. Some say that ragged leaf edges increase summer water loss because of the increased surface area exposed. Either way, a sharp mower blade making a good, clean cut is preferred. Also, mowers with sharp blades (and a new spark plug and clean air filter) use up to 22 percent less fuel, partly because of the decreased resistance when cutting.

The lawn should be mowed when it is dry. Wet grass is more difficult to cut and has the tendency to clog under rotary mowers. Mowing should not, however, be delayed for long periods of time because the grass is wet. If extended rainy periods prevent timely mowing and the grass gets too tall, move the mower height adjustment to the highest setting and mow the lawn. Once the clippings dry, lower the height adjustment to the desired height and mow the lawn a second time in a different direction. Although this double-mowing is more work, it keeps the lawn healthy and looking good.

After years of debate, it is generally accepted that leaving clippings on the lawn does not lead to increased thatch accumulation or disease problems in an otherwise healthy lawn. In fact, increased environmental concerns about fertilizers and other lawn chemicals, coupled with the advent of good mulching mowers, have made this practice widespread.

Mulching mowers pull the grass leaves up in a vacuuming action, then cut and re-cut the leaves into small pieces, allowing them to filter down into the lawn. Grass clippings contain measurable amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. Research has shown that when clippings are removed, 20 to 25 percent more fertilizer was necessary to maintain comparable color and quality as areas where clippings are returned. Recycling these essential nutrients is not only environmentally friendly, but it also saves time and money and that's a good thing.

*Virginia Gardening with Jim May* is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.